

# One Hundred Years of National Women's Suffrage in New Zealand

September 19th, 1993 marks the centennial of the passage of the parliamentary act that made New Zealand the first country in world history to grant women suffrage on a national level. It was a time of great hope for the women who had dedicatedly worked to bring about the reform. But, even to this day many of the planks on the agenda remain unrealized.

by **Brenton Arthur**

Perhaps the single most important change to both the form and function of the Western political process in the twentieth century has been the inclusion of women (the growth of the mass media excepted). The story of women's franchise opened in 1893 in the self-governing British colony of New Zealand. There and then, this "unlikely candidate" became the first country in the world to grant national female suffrage and the only country to do so before the turn of the twentieth century.

Female franchise was by no means unprecedented internationally. The women of a number of the western American states had won the vote at the state level prior to 1893: Wyoming in 1869, Utah (briefly) from 1870 to 1887, Colorado in 1893. On the Isle of Man, female property owners could vote as of 1880. The Island of Pitcairn, which had been settled by the mutineers from the *Bounty* in 1790, included equal voting status for women in their colony's constitution. Propertied women in the colony of Quebec voted from 1809 to 1849 under the notion of no taxation without representation. However, even though 1918 marked the enfranchisement of Canadian women at the federal level, Quebec women did not retrieve their right to vote until 1940.

Following on New Zealand's heels (and the devastation of World War I), other nations gave women the vote. In 1918, Great Britain gave suffrage to women over the age of thirty (after a long

and violent struggle on the part of suffragists and anti-suffragists). But, it was not until 1928 that legislation was passed to include women into the ranks of "persons" and thereby give them equal electoral status as men. In the United States, the 19th Amendment giving women the vote nationally became law in August 1920. In Australia, women of European origin won the vote in 1902 but it was not until the 1960s that Aboriginal women were included.

## Why New Zealand?

There are perhaps few candidates for world leader in any particular movement more unexpected than New Zealand. So separated geographically from the rest of the world, it was assumed that years were required for world trends to float into these backwaters.

However, New Zealand women had

the advantage of being a frontier state. The inegalitarian social structures of the mother country were not as strongly entrenched: the distance between aristocrat and plebeian much closer, the distinction between home and work more blurry, and the value of women's contributions to survival much more obvious.

New Zealand women were leading the way internationally in the realms of education and employment. The frontier environment and the recession of the late 19th century coupled to bring increasingly larger numbers of women into the work force. Eighteen ninety-one saw 45,000 women officially classed as wage earners. It was quickly realized that women could compete both competently and completely in the workplace and soon in the universities. In 1877, the first women graduates with a BA passed out of university (one year before London University began admitting women to degree programs). In



*A suffrage petition of 1893. Three hundred yards long and containing signatures of 25% of all women, when unrolled it covered the length of Parliament. [National Archives of New Zealand]*

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that same year, New Zealand girls were among the first to receive the right to free primary education.

The entrance of women onto the public stage was by no means unopposed by portions of the male population. Emily Siedeberg met strong resistance when she entered the male bastion Otago Medical School in 1891, the first woman ever to do so. She was confronted each day in the dissecting room by disapproving (or perhaps just troublemaking) male students who would throw dissected human flesh in her direction while she struggled to carry out her studies—no need to say which part of the male anatomy was usually the projectile of choice.

**When women's rights have  
come to stay,  
Oh, who will rock the cradle?  
When wives are at the polls  
all day,  
Oh, who will rock the cradle?  
When Doctor Mamma's  
making pills,  
When Merchant Mamma's  
selling bills,  
Of course, 'twill cure all  
women's ills,  
But who will rock the cradle?**

*New Zealand Graphic,  
August 1891*

## Temperance

Suffrage was but one of many causes that women's organizations strove to bring to fruition. They had already succeeded in enacting the Infant Life Preservation Act and had petitioned for universal pensions, women police, equal rights in the guardianship of children, raising the marriage age, and female justices of the peace, to name but a few.

However, the avant-garde of suffrage agitation was found in the Women's Christian Temperance Movement (WCTU), an international organization brought to New Zealand in 1885 from the United States and the United Kingdom. Women were the principal sufferers of male over-consumption: beatings, spent wages, psychological violence. For lead-

ers of the temperance movement, the vote appeared as a viable avenue for controlling the drink problem. In comparison to the laggard male drunkards (who had the vote), women looked the epitome of sensible, good living.

Women learned valuable skills in organization, administration, leadership as well as political agitation from their work in the WCTU. These "public women" were accepted into the WCTU as equals in a way not experienced in other philanthropic groups. With its international roots, the WCTU imported many Western ideas of feminism.

Under the sage leadership of Kate Sheppard, New Zealand women developed a decorous suffrage movement. Unlike Britain, New Zealand saw few of the jailings, hunger strikes (with tubes forced down strikers' throats), arson, vandalism, publicity suicides, and bombings. In order to drive the franchise movement home, Women's Franchise Leagues were formed throughout New Zealand. These groups organized petitions (one which had signatures of almost one quarter of the female population) and a nation-wide canvas that reached out to those previously unreachable—those non-temperance women. They held public meetings and made speeches. They hounded the press, submitted articles for publication with clockwork regularity, took out advertisements, and lobbied members of Parliament, often sending white camellias to sympathetic ones.

## Moving to Enfranchise

The idea of national women's suffrage was by no means new to New Zealand in 1893. There had been a long and quite drawn out process before the parliament actually passed the law. The process included many twists and turns, and highlights how one political issue can rarely be divorced from others. On more than one occasion, when the vote came in the house, suffrage was defeated for reasons unconnected with women and their competence in voting.

Eighteen seventy-eight witnessed the first determined efforts to attain national female franchise from parliament. The electoral bill included clauses that would have made women ratepayers eligible to vote and to stand for election to parliament. While female suffrage was agreed upon in theory by the house, the bill was

eventually discarded because of a parliamentary stalemate over the question of Maori (New Zealand's Aboriginal peoples) suffrage.

Before the Maori issue provided an easy exit from the dilemma, the parliamentary reaction fell into three camps: disapproval, acceptance of limited franchise, and unacceptance of limited franchise and the call for immediate, universal suffrage. The first camp feared the ramifications of releasing women's power and sexuality from the confines of domesticity. They repeatedly raised fears of sexual impropriety on the floor of the

**No, it isn't home neglecting  
If you spend your time  
selecting**

**Seven blouses and a jacket  
and a hat;**

**Or to give your day to paying  
Needless visits, or to playing  
Auction bridge. What critic  
could object to that?**

**But to spend two precious  
hours**

**At a lecture! Oh, my powers!  
The house is all a woman  
needs to learn;**

**And an hour, or a quarter,  
Spent in voting! Why my  
daughter,**

**The home would not be there  
on your return.**

*Suffragist verse*

parliament should women be allowed to sit in office—would they not use their womanly charms and wiles to influence the decisions of the male members?

Moderate parliamentarians called for female suffrage restricted to taxpayers. The moderates would only support partial enfranchisement—afraid of the ramifications of giving the vote to poorer, and presumably ignorant, women. The 'radicals', opposed to the economic discrimination and the travesty of democratic principles that such a compromise would involve, did not support the measure. They feared that such a law would allow the wealthy to give land to their wives and daughters and thereby increase their voting potential.



In the end, radicals sided with conservatives and the bill was voted down.

In 1885, all New Zealand women were granted the right to vote in local elections. During 1891-92, national suffrage was again at the forefront of parliamentary debates. Nevertheless, politicians remained wary. They were unsure whether or not to back female suffrage because they could not determine who the women would vote for. Would they be a force for conservatism or for change? There were conservatives who, while opposed to women in the public arena, believed that women would be upholders of established institutions, home and civilized values. To give them the vote would only serve the conservative cause. Other conservatives feared that poor women would vote en masse for the radicals. Both the moderates and the radicals were similarly split.

## Women Win the Vote

The actual passing of the electoral bill that enfranchised the female half of the population came about almost by accident. The Bill passed through the house for the first time with only a slight debate concerning the inclusion of Maori women (finally agreeing that they could not, in good conscience, enfranchise all non-native women while excluding the Maori). The liquor interests moved even harder to block the bill. They were paralytic that the female vote would land soundly against their industry.

While the Bill passed easily through the lower house, the same can not be said of the upper house where debate on issues was less public. When it became clear that the opposition group stood one vote shy of defeating the suffrage bill, Richard Seddon, an outspoken critic of suffrage, worked a deal to bring the necessary vote over to his side. But, when two opposition members became aware of Seddon's breach of etiquette they were so outraged that they conspired to teach Seddon a lesson. At the final moment they changed their allegiance and gave their votes in favor of the suffrage bill. Wrote the *New Zealand Herald*: "So obscured have been the real merits of the question in the manner of its determination, that it is hardly too much to say that the enfranchisement of woman has been accomplished by her enemies." A dispirited *Christchurch Press* added: "We have now got the

Female Franchise as surely as we had the measles."

Understandably the passing was received with much greater joy by women. Marion Hatton telegraphed Kate Sheppard: "Splendid meeting last night City Hall crammed mostly women enthusiasm unbounded thousand handkerchiefs waving for victory." But, Catherine Wallace of Melbourne, more than any other, best summarized the mood of euphoria when she wrote:

Your long, patient, faithful, untiring, earnest, zealous effort is finally rewarded, which means so much, not for you and the women of New Zealand only, but for women everywhere on the face of the globe. It will give new hope and life to all women struggling for emancipation, and give promise of better times, of an approaching millennium for all down-trodden and enslaved millions of women.... Right glad I am and proud of New Zealand.

The first election in which women voted took place on November 28, 1893 and was met with a great deal of trepidation from all sides. Wrote Sheppard: "We have held our breath to hear the howls from babies left untended and unwashed, from husbands who have been left dinnerless; we have listened for the hooting of men, whose indignation and disgust have been aroused by the sight of women unsexing themselves.... We have each morning opened our daily paper with fear and trembling, and although a week has passed, not one voice of lamentation has been lifted up therein."

## Only the First Step

Many of the issues that brought the first organizations of women together

remained unresolved: violence against women, the need for child care, sexual assault, the streaming of women into non-science educational tracks. While great strides have been made over the past hundred years in what concerns the status of women, statistics point to a reality in which much more is needed before a closer version of equality is approximated in New Zealand.

Women continue to earn only seventy-eight percent of men's average ordinary time weekly earnings. While women make up fifty-one percent of the New Zealand population, only 16 of 97 Members of Parliament are women (in fact, since 1919, when women were finally granted the right to stand for national office, again after a long and hard fought campaign, only 36 women have held the position) and only a quarter of local government seats are held by women. Females also remain underrepresented in management positions.

The New Zealand passage of female suffrage is a stark reminder that while laws may be changed with a few deft scratches of a pen, it requires generations for attitudes and assumptions to transform. ●



Having their fortunes told: New Zealand's politicians are given a crystal clear view of the future. [National Archives of New Zealand]